

Homeland Security Means Feeling Secure at Home

By Kathleen Carey,
Newport News Sheriff's Office

...home grown gangs are domestic terrorists.

– Gabriel A. Morgan, Sheriff of Newport News, Virginia

When you hear Homeland Security, what comes to mind? For many of us, it conjures thoughts of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. After all, the Department of Homeland Security was formed after 9/11. Its function, however, does not rest solely on tracking down and taking out Osama Bin Laden.

It has divisions that protect the nation by strengthening our borders, scanning arriving material for nuclear contaminants, enforcing immigration and maritime laws, preparing for natural and manmade catastrophes, and shoring up critical infrastructure.

But if you were to peel back the layers of an onion and reach down to the local level, you will find citizens are concerned with securing their homes. Homeland security for them means the ability to live without fear in their own neighborhoods.

Gabriel A. Morgan, Sheriff of Newport News, Virginia takes direct aim at gang activity when he thinks about terrorist activity. He says home grown gangs are domestic terrorists.

By Federal Bureau of Investigation standards, however, gangs are not defined as terrorists. That has not stopped FBI Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Alex J. Turner from targeting the suppression of gangs in his territory. SAC Turner oversees the Norfolk, Virginia field office. It extends north to Williamsburg, Matthews, Gloucester, and James City County; west to Isle of Wight and Franklin; south to Suffolk and South Hampton; and east to the Eastern Shore. Turner has been at this position since January of 2008, but has been with the FBI for 24-years.

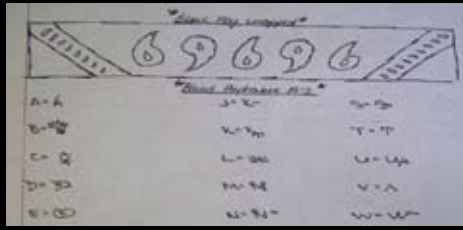


This tattoo reveals gang membership and was taken during the booking process. MOB stands for Member of Bloods. The five pointed crown represents People Nation, and alliance of gangs. Piru is a California street gang that became one of the founding members of the Bloods.

Turner conducted a threat assessment and found that counter intelligence threats are his top priority. This stands to reason considering the marine infrastructure throughout the area and the U.S. Navy's largest east coast fleet is docked at Naval Station Norfolk. Second to counter intelligence is violent gangs, followed by counter terrorism. That assessment is in sharp contrast to the FBI's national threat assessments which places counter terrorism threats first and counter intelligence threats second.

"The FBI has been involved in gang and drug investigations at least since the early to mid 1980s," explained Turner. "Gangs and drugs are often tied together." While the FBI has targeted gangs for decades, new under Turner's leadership, is placing the fight so high up on the list of priorities.

What is refreshing to Sheriff Morgan is Turner's desire to tap into the intelligence collected at local jails. "We agree that the intel coming out of jails is priceless. The intelligence shows us what the trends are. It tells us who we are housing," Morgan said. "We have intercepted codes and



This is a photo of evidence found inside the Newport News City Jail. By decoding the Bloods' Alphabet, investigators can better read and understand gang correspondence.

White Supremacists are active in Newport News, as is evidenced by these tattoos.

writings from the Bloods and other gangs,” he continued. That information is then shared with police investigators, the commonwealth attorney and other agencies that are willing to partner with the sheriff’s office. The FBI is now a clear and eager partner having assigned agents to local jails with the specific intent to neutralize violent gang activity.

Virginia gangs present a significant criminal threat to Newport News. The Newport News Police Department says there are a total of 54 active gang sets in the city. Those sets are aggressively recruiting members and committing crimes. The police estimate there are over 1200 gang members in Newport News.

Police are limited in the kind of evidence they can gather. They cannot see it all. They cannot hear it all. The Newport News Sheriff’s Office plays a critical role in assisting with criminal investigations. “Jails are the canary in the mine for law enforcement if you use the information correctly,” explained Morgan of how jails serve as early warning.

Inmates often tell deputies their gang affiliation. That is not information they share with an arresting officer. In fact, on the street, they will deny gang membership. But behind bars, things are different. An inmate’s life can depend on self reporting. If they don’t tell, they could be housed with and discovered by an enemy. During the strip search, deputies see body markings and ink that are otherwise concealed by clothing. Photos of all tattoos are taken and archived. Then there is the monitoring of communication. Both telephone conversations and mail can be intercepted. Cell searches have proven valuable in uncovering language and alphabets specific to certain gangs. Such discoveries have made it possible to decipher secret correspondence.

United States Code defines terrorism to be violence brought against targets (usually noncombatant ones). The objective of their violence is to influence some audience, usually a nation or its people. International terrorism therefore usually involves acts of terrorism involving citizens of more than one country and is usually carried out by a terrorist group.

Sheriff Morgan believes gangs fit that definition. And while FBI SAC Turner cannot go so far as to say gang members are terrorists, he does believe they present a problem. Turner and Morgan both agree that gangs are

criminal enterprises that operate like sophisticated corporations. It just so happens these particular corporations threaten homeland security.

“When you have foreign nationals being involved in gangs and the proceeds of the gangs going back to the country of origin, I see that as both a domestic and international terrorist threat,” said Morgan. He continued passionately, “They are no different than Al-Qaeda. They raise money by illegal means. They are a defined organization. Proceeds go back to their leadership. And their main weapon is fear and intimidation.”

Gangs Terrorize Our Citizens Every Single Day.

FBI SAC Turner has a three pronged strategy to combat violent gangs and secure our home turf...our homeland. First, the law enforcement piece must remain strong. Second, hot spots must be addressed the right way as a short term solution. Third, the community must be engaged. Involvement in citizen groups, churches and school is paramount to the success in deterring gang activity. Turner

*“Inmate Admits Mistake”:
The making of a movie produced by the Newport News Sheriff’s Office using inmates talking about their mistakes.*



hired a community specialist to go into schools and mentor students and educate parents and teachers.

“When they (citizens) see law enforcement working together at all levels, they get encouraged,” said Turner. Sheriff Morgan agrees, which is why he and his deputies have been going into elementary schools since 2006 with a curriculum developed by the state attorney general’s office. “Class Action: Reducing Gangs in Virginia” is an anti-gang initiative with an age appropriate message for 4th and 5th graders. Deputies volunteer their time to teach at all 26 elementary schools throughout Newport News.

The Newport News Sheriff’s Office also designed its own program more appropriate for older students. They produced a gripping video using inmates as the messengers. Sheriff Morgan said, “Let’s face it, not every student respects a person in uniform. In fact, some even resent us.” Who better to talk about the consequences of crime than those who are paying the price?

Morgan interviewed male and female inmates. He selected young ones so they would be seen as peers. These jumpsuit clad criminals tell young viewers about choices. They explain what it’s really like to be a criminal and what

it’s really like to live behind bars. It is not an easy life on the inside or on the streets.

Using a criminal as an anti-crime spokesperson is a unique approach. But there is no arguing about its effectiveness as an educational tool. Their life story may steer a young person away from gang activity and away from crime.

Forward thinking and forward looking plans are essential to deterring violent gang activity. Collaboration amongst law enforcement agencies is an absolute ingredient to a winning strategy. Local and state authorities are the first line of defense. The FBI is an additional resource, both in funding and in man power.

Together, the Newport News Sheriff’s Office and the Federal Bureau of Investigations vow to fight the terrorizing criminal activity of gangs. Together, the agencies are committed to helping citizens of New Newport News, Virginia feel less afraid to go to the store, less afraid to walk down their street, less afraid to sit on their front porch.

When it comes right down to it, for most people, homeland security means feeling more secure at home. ★

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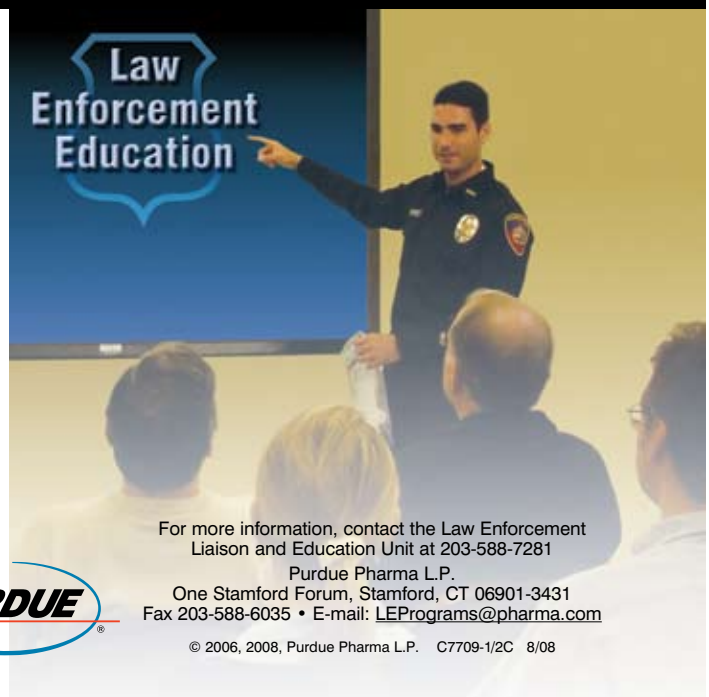
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